

# “Speaking out in an EFL university classroom in Japan”

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## 日本の大学における発話性重視の英語教育について

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### 日本語概要

当論文は学習者中心、タスクを基盤とした英語教育法について論述する。金沢大学の教養教育における英語選択科目での教育法とクラス運営について述べ、この教育法がタスクを課すことで学習者にどのように学びの機会を与えるか、を明らかにする。クラスは聴解と会話に重点をおいたものであり、様々な会話の場面を設定して発話させることにより、学習者のモチベーションを上げ、また英語を話すことへの自信をつけさせる。また学期末のアンケートで学習者のフィードバックを得ることの重要性とその教育学上の顕著な価値についても論ずる。

### Abstract

This paper describes the use of a learner-centered, task-based approach to learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It outlines the teaching and managerial procedures in an English Elective course in the Liberal Arts Division at Kanazawa University, Kanazawa, Japan, and illustrates how such an approach provides opportunities for students to learn by doing. The listening and speaking course aims to increase students' confidence by encouraging and motivating them to speak out in a variety of oral communication situations. This paper also discusses the importance of obtaining feedback from students' end of term evaluations and identifies some salient pedagogical values.

*“Teachers open the door, but you must enter by yourself.” - Chinese Proverb*

As EFL classroom practitioners know too well, learning English provides special challenges for many

Japanese learners. Learning to produce words, phrases, or conduct a conversation in English is especially challenging. As well as these linguistic challenges, “active student oral participation, ... runs counter to certain Japanese cultural norms” Miller, (1995, p31). Many Japanese learners are unlikely to ask questions, initiate conversation or introduce topics, making it difficult for teachers to understand the culture-based dispositions of their students. Prior to university-level English classes, numerous Japanese students have been exposed to a traditional grammar-translation method and in general have experienced approximately six years of reading, writing, and grammar based English language learning, with little emphasis on listening and speaking skills. The outcome of this type of environment can often result in learners' lack of confidence as well as some reluctance and/or inability to speak in the target language. Since many Japanese university students are at a lower-intermediate language-learning level for speaking and listening,

they can benefit from a bridge to help them achieve the confidence they need. The bridge, in this case, is the use of a learner-centered, task-based approach to learning EFL. This paper will describe the procedures in an English Elective listening and speaking course in the Liberal Arts Division at Kanazawa University, Kanazawa, Japan and illustrate how such an approach provides opportunities for students to learn by doing.

### A task-based approach to language teaching

Over the past two decades a number of language teaching theorists have argued the usefulness of *task* as a unit of analysis for syllabus design and classroom procedure (Long 1985, 1989; Long and Crookes 1992; Candlin 1987; Nunan 1989). Much of the literature has sought to show a cohesive psycholinguistic rationale for task-based language teaching, conceptualizing a valid implementation in the classroom. Alongside this theoretical approach to tasks have been experimental research findings, which highlight the value of small group work in language acquisition. A task-based approach to language teaching sees the target language as a whole rather than something that is broken down into convenient bits. The materials for a task-based approach to teaching should result in the realization of an end product. Focusing on attending to input in order to accomplish the end product of a task supports the theory that any task that focuses the learners' awareness on the input aids in converting input into intake (Schmidt, 1990). Tasks lend themselves to stimulating, intellectually challenging materials, especially those of a problem-solving nature (Long & Crookes, 1992), and inherent in any task will be a pedagogical goal. Skehan and Foster (1997) showed how different task-types can differ in their outcome; resulting in differences in accuracy, fluency and complexity of language produced. Implications

emerging from various ongoing studies indicate that task recycling provides a familiar conceptual base of many opportunities for learners to combine complex formulations, with fluency and accuracy (Bygate, 2000). Additionally, discerning the difference between a task and an exercise is not always clear and there are many definitions in the literature. Nunan (1999, p.25) defines it simplistically as "...a task has a non-linguistic outcome while an exercise has a linguistic outcome". There are also a number of other definitions of task and task-types that I will not discuss in this paper, but what all proponents of task-based learning and teaching seem to agree on is that *task* has the overall purpose of facilitating language learning.

### Course overview

The population in these courses comprise a mix of male and female Japanese university students in their 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year of undergraduate study and are drawn from a variety of majors; for example, Science, Law, Pharmacy, Education, Literature and Economics. The English 'B' and English 'C' levels approximate intermediate and high intermediate EFL levels respectively.

These elective classes met once weekly for 75 minutes over an average of 13-14 weeks. The courses used the textbooks *Speak Out 2 and 3*, by David Nunan, incorporating step-by-step language-building tasks that aim to provide students with the skills, confidence, and motivation to become more fluent English speakers. The texts present a logical progression of recycled language-building tasks from controlled practice with realistic language models, to more open-ended tasks. To help achieve fluency and accuracy in speaking, EFL students undoubtedly need a lot of repetitive practice. Thus, by repeating a cyclical pattern of tasks in each lesson, students can become more familiar with expectations and gradually

learn to extend tasks that challenge their progress. This approach also provides plenty of opportunities for creative language practice and helps build learner confidence through meaningful communication.

#### Using student interests as a point of departure

EFL teachers make daily decisions about language learning and teaching processes, such as which activities their students might benefit most from, which are most effective and how these might apply to learner needs or interests. However, the students themselves are seldom involved in any classroom decision-making. In this course, students are asked in the first lesson to contribute to the selection of topics to include in the syllabus.

In the first lesson I introduced the concept of "browsing" the textbook, likening it to the Japanese practice of '*tachiyomi*', standing knee-deep looking over magazines in convenience stores. I asked the students to familiarize themselves with the text by browsing through it, looking at the page layout, pictures, topics and tasks in general. With a partner, I asked them to continue browsing but talk to another student (in Japanese or English) about the topics that were most interesting. I drew attention to the "Scope and Sequence" pages and modeled how the title of a unit may not always reflect all of the content or topics. For example, Unit 17 "Do you have any experience?" - which could mean experience about many things, is actually about jobs and the workplace. I asked students to first read the unit goals and then look at the activities before making a decision. In other words, I didn't want a cursory and quick decision. The prime factors were degree of interest and usefulness, but my students also needed to understand the range of content within a unit by looking fairly closely. I supplied a form where they wrote six topics they were most interested in studying. It did not have to be in order of priority, nor did it have to be the same as

their partner. They could also add topics not covered in the text. I compiled results of this democratic procedure and based the course topics simply on a frequency count, incorporated them systematically over the curriculum and presented them to students at the next lesson. Over five semesters, the most popular topics were surprisingly consistent. Students rated the following topics as the most interesting or useful: 'Vacations', 'Personal habits', 'Travel plans and reservations', 'Health conditions and giving advice', 'Personal shopping', 'Job experiences and education', 'Planning a break', 'Locations and comparing places', 'People, past and present' and 'Movie reviews and special effects'. All of these topics included various linguistic functions such as discussing, asking questions, describing, giving advice, expressing satisfaction and dissatisfaction, persuading, and hesitating.

Beginning a course with an activity where students are the decision-makers has a number of pedagogical benefits. At the outset, it provides an opportunity for student input and ownership, thus increasing their motivation, and alerts them to the structure and content of a text. It also helps build good classroom rapport.

#### Students' perceived needs at the outset of the course

Using the same topic-survey paper, I asked students to include extra personal information and to write a short paragraph to a) introduce themselves, and b) identify which English language skill(s) was most important for them to learn in the course - listening, speaking, grammar, reading, or writing. This mini needs analysis not only served as a useful bio-data gathering exercise which alerted me: for example, to my learners' ages, majors (*senmon*), contact information, student ID#, and language learning experience, but more importantly, helped me gain a sense of the needs of the class as a whole. The results



here present data from two level 'B' classes, but are representative of all other classes.

*Speaking:* First, of 41 total responses, 31 students identified speaking as the most important skill, using phrases such as wanting to learn to speak English, speak it well, talk or have a conversation in English, speak frequently, speak with the teacher, communicate in English and make progress with speaking. Ten students connected their reason for wanting to improve and practice speaking in English to travel abroad, to use speaking skills in a job in Japan or another country and to make friends. For example,

- 'I want to be a pediatrician (a doctor for children) so for my future I want to speak English fluently. So I want you to teach us conversation and speaking'.
- 'I want to learn English. So I can see videotape without seeing ("Jimaku" subtitles) and I want to learn right accent and pronunciation'.
- 'I have been studying English for 7 years. But it's not for talking, but for some test. So I want to learn English talking or speaking in this class'.
- 'I'm going to go to the United States or Germany. But now I understand English just a tiny bit. I want to learn English conversation most'.
- Another student, contrary to one cultural norm in Japan, said: 'I can't speak English so well, so I want to learn speaking English. I wish I could learn to express my opinion in English. But in these years I have not used English, so I have forgotten, almost'.

*Listening:* Second, 11 of the 41 students identified listening as the next most important skill. (Note: two students identified both listening and speaking.)

- 'I'd like to learn listening to English

extremely! More than speaking it. So, I'm so glad to hear that you will speak only in English in this class'.

I felt comfortable with the knowledge that 100% of the students signing up for the course seemed clear about their own goals and wanted to focus on the speaking and listening English skills that I was offering, and I felt encouraged when I read one student's comment: 'I like English conversation. English is now so useful language and learning it will help me in the future. This class will be my favorite class, I think'.

### Tasks and classroom management

Before attempting to introduce any tasks, it is important to focus on classroom management concerns. For example, a seating chart showing student names and ID numbers is useful for attendance checks and for the purpose of establishing small groups. A large majority of all tasks introduced in this course are performed in small groups in which learners may communicate their personal ideas and opinions, and share information with a common purpose. This is experiential learning where the point of departure, in this case *task*, is from the learner's experience. Groups are a central component of experiential learning as they form a bridge to assist learners from the known to the new (Kolb, 1984 qtd. in Nunan, 1999). Utilizing class time efficiently, deciding on task selection, task extension, and time allocated to different task-types, as well as varying group dynamics, are also part of classroom management decision-making.

### Classroom tasks

Although it is critical to set up a task effectively, ensuring all students understand what they must do, I attempt to minimize the time I spend introducing, explaining, and modeling a task. During the time students are involved in a task, my role is to monitor tasks and group dynamics, check the pacing of tasks,

eavesdrop, interact, check understanding, address different ability levels, and intervene when I judge it necessary. This approach helps ensure my class leans more toward a learner-centered environment versus teacher-fronted.

I also use a simple management strategy that helps reduce anxiety or shyness yet includes *all* students by asking them to respond to questions with body language. For example, to answer “yes/no/maybe” questions students show thumbs up/down/hands flat; to answer questions about “how many”, students can hold up fingers. In this way, students are asked to be accountable by showing they are listening to instructions and responding to show they understand.

#### ***Homework tasks***

Although the course focuses on oral communication skills, homework tasks are used to promote ideas for listening and speaking tasks. Students are asked to write brief notes and bring them to the next lesson to use as warm up conversation topics. Usually these tasks are shared first with a partner and then within a group, for example, write a postcard, share a recipe, locate and bring a business card (*meishi*), ask 3 students a survey question, find the price of food items in a local supermarket or think about and record two good habits and two bad habits you have. Students quickly come to realize these small homework tasks are an important impetus and connecting theme for the following lesson. If a student fails to complete their homework task, they either complete the task quickly on the spot, or I reorganize groups whereby unprepared students can be passive listeners, but participate in the follow-up questions. Students utilize their prior experience and existing knowledge using real world tasks. Their work is original; it is recorded and then shared by communicating with classmates, and a new homework task alerts learners to the next student-selected topic. An extension activity was to use the homework topic,

or a variation of it, as a warm-up conversation task. I ask students to sit in pairs facing each other in a large circle. After 1-2 minutes talking informally about the topic, students stand, move one seat anti-clockwise and repeat the same topic with a new partner. This rotation is fast, connects to their homework, does not use notes and has the purpose of solidifying the vocabulary used as well as listening to 4 or 5 of their peers.

#### **Using the textbook**

The course was not syllabus or text-driven; rather it used the listening/speaking text as a springboard for a wide variety of speaking tasks. The following task structure and sequence uses the format presented in *‘Speak Out 2 and 3’*, and presents a typical 75-minute class lesson describing how I used the text. This section is also intended to provide a model lesson in terms of task types presented, underlying rationale to tasks, sequencing, timing, and classroom management. Unit 10, “Are you looking forward to your trip?” is used for ease of description and continuity of theme.

***Introduce goals and objectives:*** When goals are made explicit to learners they help provide a reason for studying English. For example, the goals of Unit 10 are to: 1) ask about plans, 2) express obligation, 3) make telephone inquiries, and 4) make reservations.

***Get Ready:*** These are pre-tasks that prepare learners by providing a context for the language to be studied and introduce basic vocabulary. For example, introducing vocabulary and dialog connected to making travel reservations.

***Start Talking:*** These tasks provide a chance to hear English conversations and dialogs and then ask learners to practice English; moving from a passive to active, yet controlled situation early in the lesson. Receptive tasks like these can reduce any learner anxiety, especially earlier in the course.



**Listen In:** This is a task type that presents plenty of receptive listening and builds on vocabulary already introduced. For example, listening and identifying when and where people are making travel reservations. Also, students usually like to listen to dialogs more than once.

**Say It Right:** These listening tasks focus on important pronunciation aspects that students can identify and practice. For example, listening to rising and falling intonation of telephone conversation at a travel agency.

**Talk Some More:** These tasks recycle and build on the basic language already introduced as well as giving students an opportunity to practice key grammatical structures. Additionally, providing formulaic and reproductive language tasks (short, model phrases, sentences and dialogs in the text) can help or challenge students to go a step further. Learners can try to use familiar words and structures in creative ways using their own information about travel plans.

**Work In Pairs:** Information gap tasks using A/B opposite seating pairing are a chance to extend the use of language already practiced in an authentic communicative context. In other words, students are challenged to provide background information, ask more questions and use the language in a more creative and extensive way. If there is an odd number, I fill in with a student.

By applying situations to their own lives and interests, the content is personalized and therefore more meaningful. Students use the "Language Summary" in the back of the text. They also have a taste of American humor – cartoon jokes – an opportunity to try and understand an often-misunderstood aspect of language learning and culture.

**Speak Out:** These tasks provide practice by building on all previous tasks and I model examples when necessary. For example, we used students' *keita denwas* as realia to practice making reservations for

personal vacations.

**Zoom In:** These present open-ended tasks with an intercultural focus that students may compare to a Japanese context.

**Course review:** At intervals throughout the term I administer short quizzes. Students were asked to review each unit as well as complete practice sheets provided in the Teachers' Guide. These self-study tasks provided a chance to reflect, consolidate, and practice English.

#### Extension ideas

**Tasks leading to small group work:** These activities formed a significant part of classroom extension tasks, for example; designing a poster, advertising a product or event, planning a travel itinerary, or planning a party. Students are given a task to prepare a group poster on a chosen subtopic. This is introduced in class, time is allocated to select and form groups, initial plans are made and the task completed for homework. In the next lesson, a short practice time is given to allow preparation of any props, coordination and sequencing of presentations, and final details before class sharing. Each group of 3-4 students has a maximum of five minutes to explain their advertisement, plus an interactive two-minute question/answer session. The task may also incorporate role-play, or students can choose to be themselves as members of a club who wish to advertise an event. The actual posters tend to become the center of attention thus allowing presenters to engage in informal information exchange about the poster content (photos, charts, vocabulary, and drawings), reducing the risk of students making language mistakes or behaving inappropriately in front of their peers.

**Using language games:** As an added activity I introduced short vocabulary and conversation games at the end of a lesson (E.g. hangman, pyramids, throw

a conversation, etc). The benefits of using language games include: a) providing an opportunity for repeating language input, b) providing an avenue for quick review and practice of course content and vocabulary, c) reinforcing spelling, and d) sustaining motivation and enjoyment.

### Pedagogical Values

Through observation of my classes, personal reflection and reference to current literature, I have identified the following pedagogical *values* of this learner-centered, task-based approach.

- **collaborative group work:** "In group work, learners produce more talk with other learners than with native speaking partners" (Porter, 1983 qtd. in Nunan 1999, p.54).
- **listening and speaking in interactive settings:** Learners are given many opportunities to listen as well as speak. "Much research on L2 listening in conversation clearly concludes that, in order to become successful participants in target language conversation, listeners need to employ a great deal of 'interactional work' (including using clarification strategies) in addition to linguistic processing" (Rost, 2001, p.10).
- **practicing language skills:** Opportunities for a lot of practice is important. "... studies of oral L2 performance within task-based contexts have identified the problems of using more accurate, fluent and complex language, and have started to explore the ways in which learners' communicative performance can be influenced though communication practice" (Bygate, 2001, p.15).
- **repetitive formula:** By following a consistent pattern of tasks for each unit, learners have a chance to concentrate on the tasks themselves

rather than working on procedural concerns.

- **learner confidence:** The scaffolding nature of the tasks, from passive to active participation, helps build learner confidence.
- **developing motivation and learner autonomy:** Asking for student input to topic selection, and using authentic tasks that present an appropriate challenge and connect to learners' lives provide more meaningful real-world interaction. Rost (1997) identifies some common features of successful speaking activities for EFL learners. He cites willingness (desire to participate), preparation (E.g. homework that students invest time in), and feedback and task structure (e.g. the teacher provides performance feedback, activities are long enough and challenging enough for all students to succeed,) as the most salient areas.

### Students' end of term evaluations.

After asking students at the outset of the class about their language needs and preferred skill areas, it was important to find out if these issues had been addressed over the course. I designed a survey, which I administered to students during the last class after the final quiz. I explained it was to be anonymous, that they could look at the textbook while answering, and ask a classmate, or me, questions if they didn't understand. I instructed them to circle their answers but to write their comments in English. They could have as much time as they needed to complete the survey.

For English 'B' and 'C' combined, n = 39. Results are presented below as raw scores (in parentheses), and follow the question format of the survey.

1. *The textbook level was:* a) very easy (1), b) easy (10), c) about right -(23), d) difficult (4),

- e) very difficult (0). The text targeted the majority of students at an appropriate level.
2. *Which unit topics did you like best?* These correlated with the topics the students chose in the first lesson, the top three being vacations, personal habits and shopping.
  3. *Was there any unit topic you didn't like?* A total of 12 students identified some topics they didn't like, but these were spread over topics both taught and not taught.
  4. *What English language task type did you like?* (Circle as many as you wish.)  
Of the task-types listed in the text, the 'Listen In' tasks were ranked highest (19), group tasks were ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> (15) and pair work tasks, which incorporated more than one task-type, ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> (14). 'Start Talking' tasks, practicing syntax and grammar, were ranked 4<sup>th</sup> (11), and 'Talk some more' ranked 5<sup>th</sup> (10). 'Get Ready' was the least liked task type. Tasks asking students to listen and speak in groups or pairs were liked the most.
  5. *What English language skill did you enjoy practicing most?* (you may circle more than one) Warm-up conversation tasks (separate from the text at the beginning of class) (28) were ranked highest, followed by listening tasks (22), oral presentations (13), conversation tasks from the textbook (11), games (10), vocabulary tasks (9), pronunciation tasks (8), reading tasks (4), and grammar tasks (3). Listening and speaking tasks were students' highest priority and they enjoyed practicing these tasks the most.
  6. *Which English language skill do you think you have improved most in?* Speaking/conversation (14), listening (10), vocabulary (3), pronunciation (2). Not only do students enjoy listening and speaking skills the most, they also perceive they have improved most in these skills.
  7. *Was this class useful for your use of English in the future?* a) very useful (20), b) useful (18), c) not useful (0). All students found the text very useful or useful for future use.
  8. *Are you a more confident speaker of English now, compared to the first lesson?*  
a) much more confident (2), b) more confident (19), c) a little more confident (18), d) no change (0). All students claimed they increased their confidence in some way, with the majority claiming they were a little more confident.
  9. *Overall, the textbook was:* a) excellent (2), b) very good (26), c) good (11), d) not so good (0). This result indicates all students were happy with the text in general.
  10. *What did you think of the art and design of the textbook?* a) I like it a lot (14), b) I liked it (23), c) I didn't like it (0), d) I didn't notice (2). Using a textbook that is visually appealing was significant in this class.
- Additionally, students were invited to comment about the teacher or the class in general. This was an opportunity for students to reflect and communicate their feelings and opinions, and perhaps bring a sense of closure to the course. For example: 'I'd like to have more opportunity to speak with you individually', 'Now, I'm not ashamed to speak English', 'I was very ashamed of speaking English but gradually I enjoyed speaking in conversation with my classmate and teacher', 'My teacher speaks English only, so I can study listening', 'Teacher and class is very good for me to study oral English', 'It's actually difficult to speak Japanese in class'.
- There is value in asking students their judgments, preferences and opinions, since the more teachers



know about their learners, the better and more productive any classroom intervention will be (Kumaravdivelu, 1991). Feedback such as the above can help teachers examine and more clearly understand student needs as well as figure positively in future curriculum decisions. Overall, in this case, there appears to be a high degree of fit between what students identified as their perceived needs at the beginning of the course and the task-types identified in the post-course evaluations, which addressed these needs.

### Conclusion

I have attempted to model how the use of a learner-centered, task-based approach to learning English as a foreign language can increase students' confidence by encouraging them to listen and speak in a variety of oral communication situations, sustain their motivation, and involve them in a variety of communicative task types. The approach can help facilitate desired language learning outcomes in the classroom, and although logistical problems could arise in classes larger than 35 students such as lack of classroom space, or inappropriate physical set up of desks for group work, there is considerable merit in adopting a task-based approach to teaching English. In this particular class of Japanese learners, indeed, they *did* speak out!

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